Introduction to the Special Issue: Cultures of US-American Conservatism

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With the following essays, our goal is to bring together scholars from different fields in order to trace the history, politics, beliefs, attitudes, and values of conservative cultures and to explore an obscure, but perhaps still viable common ground of liberalism and conservatism in the United States. The articles also demonstrate the heterogeneity of conservatism. As a loose coalition of anti-communists, libertarians, and traditionalists in the fifties, the movement has incorporated Christian conservatives, nationalists, and foreign policy hawks throughout the second half of the twentieth century. These groups often pursue different political and social agendas that, more often than not, cause inner tension within the movement.

What does conservatism mean today? Is it a set of ideas? An ideology? An identity? Such questions motivate this issue of the *American Studies Journal*, which presents a selection of papers delivered at a conference at the University of Göttingen on the Cultures of US-American Conservatism (9–12 February 2017). We, the organizers of that conference, are pleased to present research in a field that has been neglected by large segments of the American Studies community. Conservatism, we contend, has too rarely been the subject of sustained analysis because scholars have seen it as a problem, a mistake, an anachronism to be corrected by progressive education. We feel that such views are wrong. They are also shortsighted. The aim of this issue is to approach conservatism as a way of life, a set of feelings and identifications, and as a valid worldview. In short, the papers assembled here look at conservatism as a culture, or rather a collection of diverse cultures, open to cultural analysis. Taking a broad cultural studies approach—which includes perspectives from history, political science, as well as the humanities—this special issue aims to question some of the antagonisms that have been taken for granted in politics and scholarship. We believe that American studies can learn a lot by analyzing but also entering into a dialogue with conservatism. The two groups are not distinct (‘tenured radicals’ vs. ‘anti-intellectuals’) but co-occupy a contact zone where exchanges take place, ideas are held in common, and alliances might be formed.

In her historiographic essay “Collapse or Triumph? The Modern American Conservative Movement at 60,” Elizabeth Shermer reevaluates scholarly assumptions about the achievements of conservative politics in the post-WWII era and argues that the movement was and still is a fragile coalition of various groups within the Republican Party that are deeply divided over economic, social, and foreign policy issues. Shermer suggests that the study of largely overlooked
populist forces within the conservative movement might better explain why present American politics do not represent the triumph of the political Right, but rather the disintegration of a never strongly unified movement.

In his essay “Rise of the Small Business Owner in Progressive Era Culture,” James Dorson outlines in what ways progressive reform ideology and conservative business ideas were deemed compatible at the beginning of the twentieth century. He argues that Progressive Era novels by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Jack London, and Edgar Rice Burroughs were instrumental in reviving a positive cultural perception of the small business owner by realigning business practices with notions of property rights, individualism, and the efficient and proper management of resources. Dorson thus traces the cultural roots of economic principles that became central to the conservative movement in the post-WWII era back to what are now commonly seen as the ideals of the Left.

MaryAnn Snyder-Körber analyzes how Mormons developed from an isolated religious group, perceived to be a threat to American democratic values, into a respectable faction of the conservative movement in her essay “Reed Smoot’s Prayers and the ‘Mormon Moment’ of US-American Politics.” Snyder-Körber argues that the steadfast composure of Utah Senator Reed Smoot and Mormon political strategies at the beginning of the twentieth century changed public perception of Mormon culture. Mormonism’s subsequent influence on national politics increased when conservative religious groups, the so-called moral majorities, united on family-value agendas, which became visible most recently in internal debates over supporting the Trump presidency.

Florian Zappe’s article “Conservative Exorcisms: On William F. Buckley Jr.’s Anti-Liberal Crusade and the Demon of Atheism,” discusses Buckley’s role in the formation of the conservative movement during the 1950s. He argues that the co-founder and chief editor of the National Review used religious rhetoric to invoke the “specter of atheism” in his attacks on liberal thought. The essay demonstrates that Buckley’s idiosyncratic cultural politics not only positioned conservatism against the liberal educational policies of such institutions as Yale, which Buckley reproached in his seminal book God and Man at Yale, but also against the libertarianism of atheist novelist Ayn Rand.

In “Antiacademism as Anticapitalism: The Rise of American Cultural Conservationism,” Pierre-Héli Monot invokes what may be a conservative but is certainly a conservationist tradition in his indictment of post-structuralism. Basing his analysis on a CIA report dismissing French post-structuralism as fundamentally apolitical, he argues that post-structuralists have not advanced a coherent political position but have been complicit in the radical restructuring or “destratification” of research universities. It is no accident that the academic disciplines that declared language to be non-referential have lost their institutional standing, Monot argues. He holds up Wendell Berry and George Oppen as alternatives to Deleuze and Guattari. The farmer-essayist and the Objectivist poet stress the importance of local communities and traditions, which are ultimately responsible for establishing the relevance of culture and, Monot argues, of cultural studies.
Andrew Majeske suggests in his essay “Donald Trump, American Caesarism, and the Legacy of Leo Strauss” that in order to fight recent autocratic threats to democratic values, we might refer back to Strauss’s critique of modernity, expressed in Natural Right and History, and to his attempts to shore up the fiction of natural rights in Western societies. That natural rights are fictional, which is to say an invention, is revealed through the study of culture and the history of political theory. However, whatever their mythical origins, they are necessary for resisting the tyranny of modern Caesars—something conservative thinkers have long argued.

In “Rise and Demise of American Unipolarism: Neoconservatism and US Foreign Policy, 1989–2009,” Maria Ryan outlines the trajectories of neoconservative politics in the post-Cold War era and argues that unipolarism rather than the promotion of democracy was the main principle of US foreign policy. The influence and unity of neoconservatives began to decline after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Although the effort to secure America’s unipolar position of power has arguably backfired, neoconservatives still aim for a lesser form of American dominance, as Ryan suggests. Foreign policy Realists thus criticize Trump’s policy of isolationism and its weakening effects on neoconservative notions about international leadership.

In the Afterword, “Conservatism and the Liberal Tradition,” Susann Köhler and Andrew Gross resuscitate the conservative thinker Peter Viereck as representative of a culture of political compromise. Viereck called on liberals and conservatives to team up against the dual threats of populism and totalitarianism. Today, some thinkers from the left and the right are following his lead, perhaps unconsciously, in proposing a coalition against the dual threats of populism and illiberalism. Culture divides, but it also offers a way to agree about the parameters of disagreement. Conservatives and liberals can both draw on a tradition that recognizes the importance of a free press and open debate. In reviving a conservative version of the liberal tradition through Viereck, this Afterword points to an obscure, but perhaps still viable common ground in the United States.

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